

At the end of my career I don't want to sit and think - 'what do I do now?' I'd rather have things setup that I can actually grow later on. And understand the business side, so I can do that when I am done playing cricket. - **Virat Kohli**



As it enters its 10th year, is it time for IPL and the brands on the platform to step back and introspect?

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Just as brands go in for a refresh to remain relevant, is it time for Brand IPL to go in for one as well? That it is possibly the biggest (and the most expensive) carnival this side of the Ganges is not a revelation. Views T Gangadhar, managing director, MEC India, "In terms of importance and relevance, it is the most marquee property by far. So much so that investing in IPL is a boardroom decision now, for most companies." For many corporates, spending on IPL means apportioning nearly half their marketing budgets. Obvious questions are thus being asked on its efficacy both as a sport and as a must have in the marketing plans of brands.

To begin with, the decade old property needs to remain compelling enough for users to find time for it in a world which has a lot more on offer by way of entertainment than it did a mere 10 years ago. Says Seema Gupta, associate professor - marketing, Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, "The novelty of seeing celebrities, businesspersons and cricketers come together to create



a mega entertainment show is waning."

Are brands getting bang for the buck?

While the sponsor kitty becomes fatter and more brands join the fray, the question being asked is about the value of that money. As a senior marketer points out, it is increasingly getting to be about categories like Chinese mobiles, agarbatti brands, underwear brands fighting for the space with the big daddies. Rohit Ohri, group chairman and CEO, FCB Ulka holds that it's a great platform to build salience quickly and invaluable for new launches - possibly why Chinese handset makers are most visible. But it's a fact that IPL requires a very significant marketing investment. The title sponsor-

CAN IPL GENERATE WATER-COOLER CONVERSATIONS LIKE THE EUROPEAN SOCCER LEAGUES?

ship deal, for example, challenges ROI completely in his view.

Increasing clutter, according to LG Electronics India's marketing head, Amit Gujral, has left brands advertising on the platform with hardly any recall. Which is why the Korean durables giant decided to take the experiential route. As official TV partners for the KKR team, the company does a lot of activation both on-ground, in store and on digital/social media. For it to remain a compelling media-vehicle, it may become imperative for IPL to choose the number and type of brands it wants to associate with,

as that would define its long-term value, according to Sanjay Tripathy, (former) head marketing, HDFCLife. It'd also help de-clutter the space for sponsor brands, ensuring better bang for the buck.

Entertainment ka baap, but can we also have the sport please?

When IPL was launched 10 years back, recalls Gangadhar who was closely associated with the first IPL edition at Sony, the idea was to create a viable alternate to entertainment via the cricketing sport. (The tagline then was - *manoranjan ka baap*). Those were the days of mostly

single TV households and not much popularity of club game concept. For a wider acceptance, the entertainment surround was created around the league. In Gujral's view, IPL's quick cricket format was a welcome change from the fatigue of longer games.

Along the way however, the core positioning of 'cricketainment' could use some sharpening. For a cricket-starved nation you just cannot have semi-empty stadiums, says Ronesh Puri, MD, Executive Access, a global search firm and a former A.I.R. cricket commentator himself.

Country cricket vs county cricket?

While cricket invokes nationalist fervour in large swathes of the population, how much of it happens in the IPL format?

Emotional connect with a team is often AWOL in the current avatar. Puri believes, "Firstly, each team should stand for something so they have an emotional resonance. Secondly, it should be made imperative that a fixed number of people from home-turf be playing in the home-team so there is a sense of fan-loyalty." Also, the fact that the teams engage with fans only immediately before and during the season, does not seem to help much in building year-long engagement.

Many brands are retro-fitting their investments for cricket accordingly. The car-maker Hyundai, for instance bets big on cricket as an investment and is the sponsor for BCCI for all formats of cricket - test matches, one day matches and T20 - except for IPL. Says Rakesh Srivastava, senior VP (sales & marketing) at Hyundai Motors, "Cricket as a game invokes national pride and as a global brand, we would like to keep our engagement at a national level without sponsorship involvements limited to regional or city specific teams." The brand advertises during IPL for tactical reasons, towards new launches and promotional offers mostly.

At 10, it should be aspirational

Roughly translated as bragging rights. Considering the large contingent of global players, the true test of IPL's popularity is if it generates the kind of water cooler conversations over a match, across all cricket playing nations - and maybe even a few non-cricket playing ones - the way the European soccer leagues do these days. Now that could be the lodestar to aspire for.

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